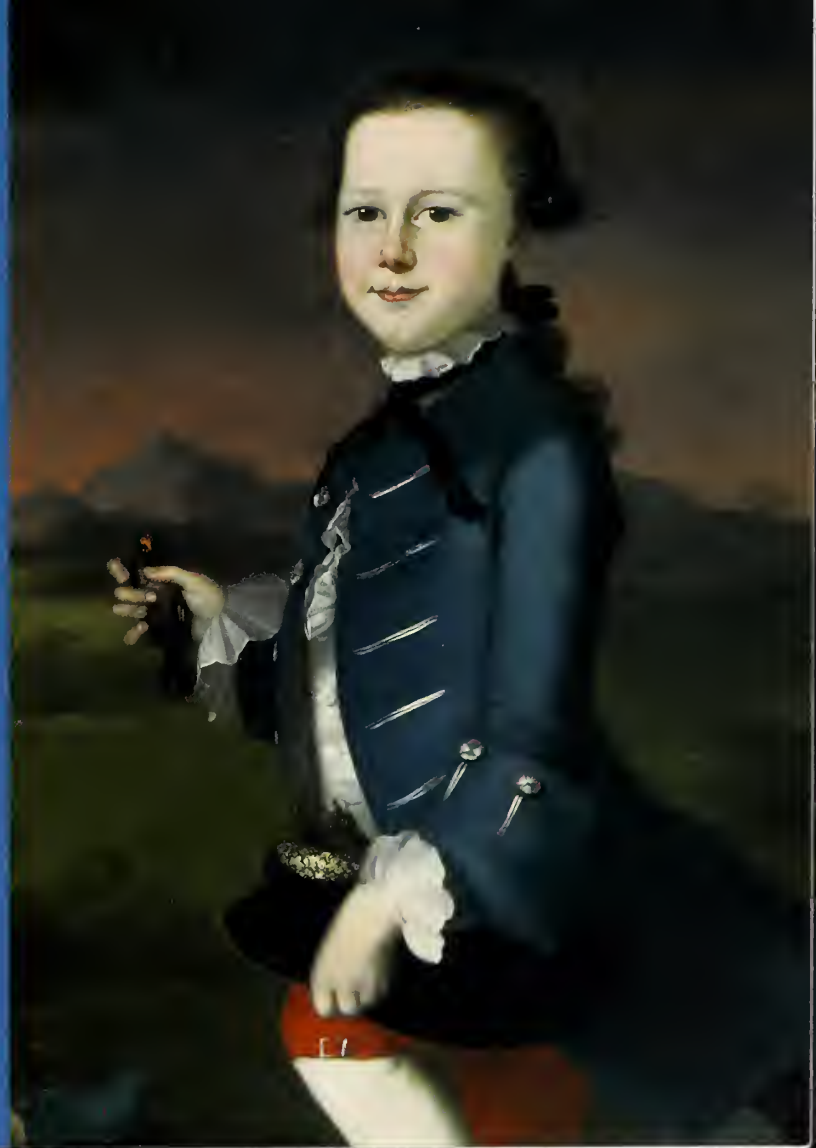


JAMES BOWDOIN III
PURSUING STYLE
IN THE AGE
OF INDEPENDENCE



BOWDOIN COLLEGE MUSEUM OF ART

BRUNSWICK, MAINE



JAMES BOWDOIN III

PURSUING STYLE IN THE AGE OF INDEPENDENCE

V. SCOTT DIMOND



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Cover illustration: detail of *Portrait of Elizabeth Bowdoin and James Bowdoin III*, ca. 1760 by Joseph Blackburn, (see page 4).

Back cover: *The Honorable James Bowdoin III*, ca. 1804 by Edward Greene Malbone, American, 1777–1807. Watercolor on ivory, 3 1/2 x 2 1/2 inches. Gift of Mrs. Dorothy Hupper in honor of President and Mrs. Kenneth C. M. Sills, 1951.

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Bowdoin College Museum of Art Brunswick, Maine

In 1776, American colonists declared independence from Great Britain. Following several years of desperate war, they won the right to craft a nation in their own image. Casting aside English concepts of hereditary rank, deference, and *noblesse oblige*, they began to reassess ties to the mother country in light of new ideals of equality and self-determination. As the erstwhile colonials shed their Anglo personas and defined for themselves what it meant to be "American," almost every cultural product from art to hard science underwent a process of collective rethinking.

From the war's end in 1783 until the 1820s, when the revolutionary generation began dying out, Anglo culture was gradually transformed into American culture. "Columbian" books and newspapers began to appear on the shelves next to multi-volume sets of British classics, and new writings bearing titles such as *Constitution* and *Federalist* shouldered their way alongside treatises on dancing and courtly deportment.¹ Scientific instruments made in London were used in American experiments, and the results were published on both sides of the Atlantic. Homegrown

painters gained increasing recognition, and some of them, including John Singleton Copley and Gilbert Stuart, became as famous and sought-after as their English counterparts. American cabinet-makers consulted Hepplewhite and Sheraton pattern books even as they brought their own sense of proportion and ornament to stylish furniture design. Similar developments unfolded in agriculture, manufacturing, and dozens of other areas, and slowly but surely Americans forged a distinct culture of their own.

Not surprisingly, it was those who had been most closely connected to England—the old colonial elite—who wrestled the most with their newfound “American-ness.” In a society in which the choices of these privileged few were closely scrutinized, the decision to retain or discard the culture, and more importantly, the *style* of England could be agonizing, especially when there was little of worth (as yet) to replace it. Aristocratic patriots made compromises, and sometimes sacrifices, as they set aside the refinements of the old country in order to encourage a new culture of liberty and equality.

This exhibition is a case study in cultural transformation. Its subject is James Bowdoin III, an important early benefactor of Bowdoin College and scion of one of New England’s most prominent eighteenth-century families. Through foresight and good fortune, elements of James Bowdoin’s material world—his books, his art collection, and his clothes—survive. Together with existing documentation of his household furnishings, these objects reveal much about how we became Americans.

From childhood, James was steeped in an environment that was materially if not politically aristocratic and anglophile. As Joseph Blackburn’s splendidly rococo portrait of the young Bowdoin children suggests, James was assiduously molded to fit the colonial ideal of the English gentleman. Dressed in tailored fabrics and pressed into an adult attitude that suggests his status as heir to the Bowdoin name and estate, James appears to have been raised an English lordling rather than the son of a prosperous colonial merchant. Indeed, after a period of study at Harvard, from which he received



Joseph Blackburn, American, ca. 1730–ca. 1778
Portrait of Elizabeth Bowdoin and James Bowdoin III, ca. 1760
 oil on canvas, 36 ⁷/₈ x 58 ¹/₁₆ inches
 Bequest of Mrs. Sarah Bowdoin Dearborn, 1826.11

a degree *in absentia*. James traveled to England, where he studied briefly in the company of wealthy young scholars at Christ Church, Oxford.

James was in his early twenties and had recently completed his Grand Tour of Europe when the Revolution broke out at Lexington in 1775. In no hurry to return home, he remained abroad for several months afterwards, departing for New England sometime in the fall of that year. By early 1776, James was back in Boston, where his father (a staunch patriot despite his preference for British style) was actively engaged in Revolutionary politics. James himself sat out the war, and when it was all over, he returned to his gentlemanly pursuits, content to live quietly in his father's large shadow. Upon the latter's death in 1790, however, James suddenly found himself heir not only to several generations of Anglo-aristocratic culture, but also to the high expectations of those who had greatly esteemed the elder Bowdoin as a true American, an unswerving patriot, the governor of Massachusetts, and the friend of George Washington.

James, however, lacked the ambition and talent of his father in the political realm (his one major public office, that of ambassador to Spain under Thomas Jefferson, ended in failure), but in the years following the Revolution, he had well learned the importance of being "American." Indeed, the gifts and bequests to the institution that bears his family name show how one aristocrat-turned-republican became a deft arbiter between the style of the old country and the social promise of the new.

The most telling documents of cultural transformation are to be found among the books that once resided in James's library. Bequeathed to Bowdoin College, the majority of these volumes were published from the mid-eighteenth century to the time of James's death in 1811. Although some of the older titles were probably youthful purchases from his days as a young gentleman abroad, it is almost certain that James acquired some of the later titles for the use of the College's students.² Political manuals such as *The Constitution, or Frame of Government for the United States of America* and *The American Citizen's Sure Guide* may have served James

as reference materials, but for a student body that had no direct experience of the Revolution and its principles, these publications would be indispensable in navigating the complexities of the world's first modern democracy.

Politics were not the only subject on James's mind, and he understood that America had to be redefined culturally, historically, and physically. Notable among his gifts were books researched and written by American authors for specifically American audiences. These include Joel Barlow's epic poem, *The Columbiad*; Jeremy Belknap's *American Biography*; and Alexander Wilson's compendious survey of American birds, *American Ornithology*.

Equally intriguing are the older texts, a number of which are decidedly aristocratic in character. James gave these to the College as well, and one may ask why he viewed them as useful or educational. To modern eyes, books bearing titles such as *Letters to a Young Nobleman* and *The English Compendium, or, Rudiments of Honour* might be interpreted as negative examples, or what *not* to be



Robert Feke, American, ca. 1707–ca. 1752
 Portrait of Mrs. James Bowdoin II (née Elizabeth Erving), 1748
 oil on canvas, 50 ³/₈ x 40 ¹/₂ inches
 Bequest of Mrs. Sarah Bowdoin Dearborn, 1826.7



Gilbert Stuart. American, 1755–1828
Portrait of Mrs. James Bowdoin III (née Sarah Bowdoin),
 ca. 1805
 oil on canvas. 30 ¹/₈ x 25 ³/₁₆ inches
 Bequest of Mrs. Sarah Bowdoin Dearborn, 1870.7

as an American. It is possible, however, that James saw these books as valuable for the information they contained regarding taste and elegance—in short, as style guides, sources that were in some ways as important as the political manuals. James and other members of the colonial elite still admired English culture, and they feared that having cut themselves off from England, Americans ran the risk of descending into barbarism. And if Americans had won independence from England, they had yet to earn the respect of the English. For James, instilling American youth with civility was a good beginning.

The paintings in James's art collection reveal a similar negotiation between the imperatives of republicanism and the necessity of cultural refinement. It is significant that James's bequest of art to Bowdoin College was the first made to an American institution of higher learning, for it underscores his belief in the critical role of art in the education of an emerging generation of cultural and political leaders.

As Susan Wegner has observed, James undoubtedly intended his bequest of art to play an educational role.³ Like the political manuals in James's library, the two magnificent portraits of *Thomas Jefferson* and *James Madison* by Gilbert Stuart—probably destined for James's consular office in Madrid—were presented to the College as models of republican virtue. Notwithstanding the palatial setting of each painting, Jefferson and Madison appear simply and soberly dressed, bearing thoughtful expressions appropriate to enlightened philosopher-rulers. Setting aside crowns, scepters, and other symbols of the divine right of kings, the two statesmen are here accompanied by books and papers—emblematic, perhaps, of the rule of law and the role of education in preparing the American citizen not only to choose his leaders wisely, but also to fitly govern as part of a collective polity.

Although the Stuart portraits are arguably the centerpieces of James's art bequest, the bulk of the collection consisted of originals and copies of European Old Masters. James's father probably

acquired some of these, but James purchased others during his sojourns on the Continent and (it seems) in the Boston studio of the late John Smibert. Such objects were rare in the Early Republic, and to seek them out and display them was a pronounced way of identifying with the English *dilettanti* who had made a fad of collecting them. Knowledge of art history and British collecting tastes were badges of elite status, but to James they were also a mark of refinement, much like courtly manners or the ability to dance well. Exposure to fine art, then, would be yet another means of polishing young Americans.

As with art collecting, the pursuit of science, or "natural philosophy," was a luxury for gentlefolk of means. In the American colonies, scientific instruments were costly and almost always imported. When not in use, these instruments were often displayed as status symbols, an idea that is reinforced by the stylish Chippendale cabinet housing the air pump that was presented to Bowdoin College sometime before 1802.⁴



Gilbert Stuart, American, 1755-1828
Portrait of James Madison, ca. 1805-1807
 oil on canvas, 48 1/2 x 39 3/4 inches
 Bequest of the Honorable James Bowdoin III, 1813.54



Gilbert Stuart, American, 1755-1828
Portrait of Thomas Jefferson, ca. 1805-1807
 oil on canvas, 48 1/2 x 39 3/8 inches
 Bequest of the Honorable James Bowdoin III, 1813.55



Unknown Artist, England (Sheffield)
Loving Cup, late eighteenth century
 Silverplate on copper, 13 1/2 x 10 x 5 1/2 inches
 Collection of the Massachusetts Historical Society

More importantly, scientific inquiry offered wealthy colonists the tantalizing prospect of being received as equals by their British counterparts. Thanks to Enlightenment ideals positing an international community of scientists, Americans (and Benjamin Franklin was the supreme example) could potentially achieve intellectual parity with the English. James's father understood this, and he eagerly conducted his own scientific investigations in a variety of areas. He was one of the founders of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1780 and ultimately donated his own library to the academy. His zeal for recognition was ultimately rewarded when, late in life, he earned the coveted prize of election to London's Royal Society.

Although he was less wide-ranging in his scientific pursuits, James developed a strong interest in geology.⁵ He kept abreast of English and French advances in this field, and like his father, he undoubtedly understood the power of scientific inquiry in erasing national prejudices. In contrast to his father, however, James seems to have had little personal drive to be accepted as a scientific peer

of the English. James's focus appears to have been largely personal, and it developed somewhat late in his career, about the time Bowdoin College enrolled its first students in 1802. As with his library and art collection, then, it is possible that James viewed his scientific pursuits in light of the College, and as a means of advancing the reputation of the infant United States. He bequeathed almost a thousand dollars' worth of scientific apparatus to the College, including a sizable collection of European mineral specimens and a set of French crystal models.⁶ At Bowdoin (James may have surmised), another Franklin would arise, and with the aid of well-crafted instruments and rare specimens, that individual would make discoveries that would bring recognition and honor to his country.

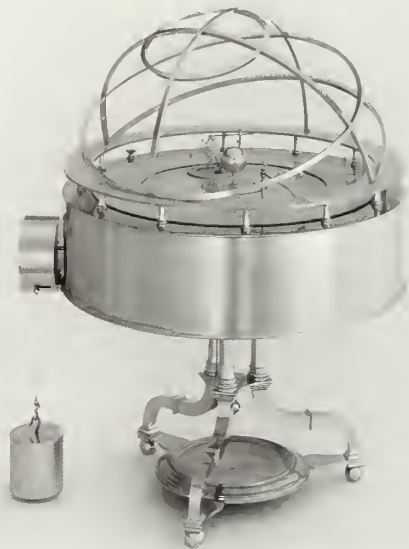
When seen in their original context and again in their "second life" at Bowdoin College, the didactic quality of James's library, art collection, and scientific specimens and instruments leads us to make assumptions about how one colonial aristocrat envisioned becoming "American." But what of James's personal milieu and the everyday items

that were not intended for the betterment of students? Although we do not have a complete record of his personal possessions, documentation and surviving examples of James's home furnishings and wardrobe can shed further light on his thoughts about English versus American style.

The evidence suggests that James, like other wealthy Americans, placed a premium on fashionable and well-made goods. Revolution notwithstanding, English and French material culture remained the standard by which Americans judged their own production. In the areas of cabinetmaking and metalworking, for example, American craftsmen held their own and were patronized by the elite. In the fields of ceramics, wallpaper, and textile manufacturing, however, Americans simply could not compete with the English for quality and low cost. Objects intended for public display in drawing rooms and parlors suggest that James preferred high-quality foreign imports (in this case, French wallpaper, drapery curtains, and parlor furniture), yet he played to American strengths where he could.⁷ American silver, including flatware by

noted craftsmen Ebenezer Moulton and Paul Revere, adorned tables and sideboards alongside French porcelain, British silver, and a magnificent silver tureen by French silversmith Charles-Louis Spriman. American ceramics, however, were notably absent.

James's surviving clothing tells a similar tale, for despite vocal pleas on behalf of America's fledgling textile industry, wealthy Americans were reluctant to be seen in the crudely patterned fabrics that characterized native manufacture.⁸ James's best suits, of which several are extant, show little evidence of wear and were worn only for special occasions.⁹ Carefully preserved by descendants, they served as tangible markers of the wearer's social status, style, and refinement. The suits' materials—rich cut velvet and silk—are European in origin, and at least one of the suits, an elaborate costume made to be worn at the court of Napoleon and now in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, was tailored in Europe as well. If James did own articles of clothing that were entirely of American manufacture, it is telling that none of these were saved, for they had



Benjamin Martin, British, 1704–1782
Grand Orrery with Clockwork Mechanism, 1760s
 brass, silvered brass concentric rings, ivory earth.
 31 ³/₁₆ x 22 ¹/₁₆ x 24 ¹³/₁₆ inches
 Gift of the Honorable James Bowdoin, Esq.
 Department of the History of Science, Collection of
 Historical Scientific Instruments, Harvard University



Louis-Leopold Boilly, French, 1761–1845
Portrait of Sarah Bowdoin, ca. 1806–1808
oil on canvas, 8 ⁹/₁₆ x 6 ⁹/₁₆ inches
Gift of Donald Zuckert, Bowdoin Class of 1956,
and Susan Zuckert

neither the associations nor the value that made them worth preserving.

James was proud to have made the transformation from British colonist to "American," and he wanted his countrymen, particularly the younger ones, to share his pride. Yet his patriotism was not blind, or even shortsighted, for he saw that Americans and their nascent culture would require shaping and pruning. The Revolution's values of independence and equality were admirable, but in order to be taken seriously by the rest of the world, they would have to be wedded to taste, style, and polite deportment. By the same token, if native manufactures could not rise to meet foreign standards, then a kind of Darwinian selection would necessarily prevail, and only the most competitive enterprises would receive patronage. Until then, Americans would continue to show their taste by adopting the best of both worlds, old and new.

Notes

1. "Columbian" is an adjective used to describe the people, territory, and culture of the United States of America. The word came into popular use following the successful conclusion of the Revolutionary War and was frequently employed to distinguish the productions of American authors and presses at a time when English literature still predominated.
2. For a complete account of James Bowdoin III's library, see Kenneth E. Carpenter, "James Bowdoin III as Library Builder" in Kenneth E. Carpenter, Linda J. Docherty, Arthur M. Hussey II, et al., *The Legacy of James Bowdoin III* (Brunswick, Maine: Bowdoin College Museum of Art, 1994), pp. 84-125.
3. See Susan E. Wegner, "Copies and Education: James Bowdoin's Painting Collection in the Life of the College," in Kenneth E. Carpenter, Linda J. Docherty, Arthur M. Hussey II, et al., *The Legacy of James Bowdoin III*, pp. 142-185.
4. Martha G. Fales, "Dr. Prince's Air Pump," *The Magazine Antiques* 103, no. 3 (March 1973): 499-501. The Bowdoin air pump is extraordinary in that it is the work of an American, the Reverend John Prince of Salem, Massachusetts. Although the patron underwriting the costs of Prince's air pump and its valuable case has yet to be documented, it is known that the instrument was presented to Bowdoin College before 1802. It is a superlative example of what Americans could accomplish in the rarefied "high-tech" sphere of instrument making.
5. See Arthur M. Hussey, "James Bowdoin III and Geology at Bowdoin College" in Kenneth E. Carpenter, Linda J. Docherty, Arthur M. Hussey II, et al., *The Legacy of James Bowdoin III*, pp. 126-139.
6. See Kenneth E. Carpenter, "James Bowdoin III as Library Builder," in Kenneth E. Carpenter, Linda J. Docherty, Arthur M. Hussey II, et al., *The Legacy of James Bowdoin III*, pp. 84-125. Bowdoin's bequest of "two globes" and "mineralogical, chemical, and electrical apparatus and instruments" was valued at exactly \$979.37 1/2 (p. 85).
7. I would like to express my thanks to Laura Fecych Sprague for sharing her knowledge of James Bowdoin III's interior furnishings. See also Richard Saunders III, "James Bowdoin III (1752-1811)" in Kenneth E. Carpenter, Linda J. Docherty, Arthur M. Hussey II, et al., *The Legacy of James Bowdoin III*, pp. 1-31, p. 20 esp.
8. In 1793, Philadelphia calico printer John Hewson wrote to Martha Washington, begging her to wear his chintz fabric so that she "might be a great means of introducing the like amongst the more affluent of our fellow citizens, and... help remove the injustice, that at present too much prevails, against American manufactures." Letter of John Hewson to Martha Washington, quoted in Linda Eaton, *Quilts in a Material World: Selections from the Winterthur Collection* (New York: Abrams, New York in association with the Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, Inc., 2007), p. 96.
9. Two of James Bowdoin III's suits are held in the George J. Mitchell Department of Special Collections & Archives at Bowdoin College. James's court costume is in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, together with an embroidered muslin dress belonging to his wife, Sarah Bowdoin Dearborn.



Bowdoin

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